

What is a parish council?

Local councils are the tier of local government **closest to the people**. They are **local** councils. Parish, Town, Community or City Council – in Cornwall they are the same. They have the same powers and act within the same legislation.



Local councils represent the concerns and aspirations of a genuine local community. They are not a voluntary organisation, not a charity nor (a common mistake) anything to do with the Church.

Your local council employs a part-time Parish Clerk who manages the business of the council and carries out the decisions of the councillors. There's no permanent office, so the best ways to contact them will be by phoning or emailing. The part-time nature should not, however, be taken as any indication of the effectiveness and efficiency of the council as many Parish Councils work very hard for their electors and can run a wide range of services very effectively.

In order to properly account for the public money they spend, the council is strictly audited each year. Parish Councils are the least bureaucratic and the cheapest kind of local authority in existence.

What can they do?

As Parish Councils were created in law, they can only act within the law by exercising their powers and functions which have been given them by Statutes (i.e. Acts of Parliament). Provided that the law allows, they are able to do anything in their area to support their local communities.

The range of powers available to Parish Councils continues to change; the Government's commitment to localism and devolution ensures that more opportunities are available to local councils than ever before. Local councils are playing a key part improving services by bringing them closer and making them more responsive to local communities. Already local council responsibilities are many and varied, including (not a comprehensive list) the purchase of land and buildings, providing and maintaining village greens, the provision of recreational facilities, crime prevention measures and traffic calming. In future these responsibilities will be far greater.

Local councils have many powers if they choose to use them. It is how and which of these powers that councillors decide to use, that makes a vibrant forward thinking Parish Council and can bring positive benefits to communities. The basic responsibility of local councils is to make the lives of their local communities more comfortable by representing the whole electorate within the parish, delivering or co-ordinating services to meet local needs and striving to improve quality of life in the parish. Local councils will also comment on planning applications and be represented at public enquiries.

Parish Councils raise their income through a variety of sources but for this one it is mainly through a small percentage of the Council Tax bill paid by local householders. This is called the Precept. Local council budgets are a tiny part of the whole Council Tax and local councils do not receive any Government funding or income from business rates.

Whatever the make-up of your council, it's there to represent people's hopes and concerns for ensuring that local services are provided efficiently and effectively for the benefit of community wellbeing. A well informed council is aware of what its community needs and

strives to provide this through team work, accessing grant funding, representation at other meetings and lobbying appropriate bodies.

Depending on their size and the services provided, they may employ staff for the benefit of the community. All councils must meet at least four times a year (although most meet more often) and their meetings must be open to the public, although for certain restricted items of confidentiality they may occasionally exclude the public.

A local council *is* the collective voice of its community.

If you'd like to know more about becoming a parish councillor, look out for our Quick Guide to *Applying to become a councillor*. You can download a copy from our website.

Source: Cornwall Association of Local Councils

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